

Book Review – Mason, Andrew S. *Plato*. Ancient Philosophies, 8 (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2010). 224 pages. ISBN: 978-0-520-26541-7. Price \$18.95

“Created especially for students,” each volume in the *Ancient Philosophies* series aims to offer “a clear yet rigorous presentation of core ideas. Designed to lay the foundation for a thorough understanding of their subjects, these fresh and engaging books are compact and reasonable priced, with illustrative texts in translation.” (ii) Nine volumes have now appeared, and this volume on Plato by Andrew Mason, the eighth in the series, is another welcome addition.

According to the author, “This book aims to present Plato’s thought to readers with no previous knowledge of it. In line with the general aims of the *Ancient Philosophies* series, it is written with senior undergraduates and first-year graduate students particularly in mind, but I have tried to make it accessible to a wider readership as well.” (vii) The volume succeeds in this aim, providing students new to Plato with highly readable, informative, and at times provocative introduction to the thought of this cardinal figure in the history of philosophy.

The present reviewer does not envy the herculean task of writing an introduction to the thought of Plato for a number of reasons; not only has so much already been said, but the endeavour to introduce and summarise the thought of a philosopher, so foundational, whose ideas span a long and important period of history, change and develop within that period, and are rarely explicitly stated in his own words as his own, immediately presents the author of such a book with some serious decisions to make. First among these, one which affects the entire plan of this study, is the author’s decision to organise the book thematically rather than genealogically. Each approach has its virtues and vices. A genealogical approach might more closely examine the development of Plato’s thought throughout his philosophical career and how certain questions arise from previous positions. This might provide a more complete historical picture. An historical approach would necessitate a repetition of themes, which might be confusing to a new student. Though taking the historical progression might be more confusing for an introductory text and would have to repeat itself by returning upon the same themes over and over again. The author, however, chooses the thematic approach, which has the benefit of dealing with a different feature of Plato’s thought in each chapter. It is difficult to say simply what Plato thinks about any particular subject, since his views change over time and his own position is sometimes difficult to ascertain from the dialogues. The author is of course aware of this and is careful to tell the reader that Plato’s position on certain points changes. Further, the author explains that he neglects the earlier Socratic dialogues only because there is a future volume on Socrates planned for the series. Nevertheless, the present reviewer believes that the volume could benefit from a more in-depth presentation of Plato’s historical context and his Pre-Socratic predecessors. Something along these lines would go a long way towards situating the reader historically.

The first chapter is an overall introduction dealing briefly with Plato’s life, the character of his writings, and the plan of the book. The author states that his aim to “to introduce some of Plato’s central ideas” (13). He stresses Plato’s relevance today, claiming that “Sometimes his ideas may actually be seen as making a contribution to current debates; at other times they may draw our attention to issues that are unfairly neglected” (2). The present reviewer was pleased to see that the author helpfully reminds the reader that, “Philosophy for him is a way of life, and philosophical reasoning is important in guiding the way we should live,” a common view among the Ancients that is unfortunately foreign to many approaches to philosophy today (3).

In the second chapter, ‘Plato’s development and Plato’s Socrates’ (p. 15-26), the author introduces the reader to the distinctions and similarities between Plato’s Socrates and the historical Socrates, and to the various stages of Plato’s thought. For example, he points out that the later dialogues display “a more down-to-earth, practical approach to ethical and political issues, emphasizing the point that abstract philosophical knowledge needs to be supplemented by awareness of particular facts” (24). On forms, he notes that “while the theory may have changed in detail, it cannot have been

wholly abandoned” (24). This brief chapter also addresses the natural limits to his thematic approach, and the author warns the reader that “we must be cautious in assuming that what is said in one dialogue represents Plato’s settled position; but it is possible to see some unity in his ideas, and discuss his thought as a whole” (26).

After the first two short chapters, the author begins to address the key features of Plato’s thought, beginning in chapter 3 with Plato’s ‘theory of forms’ (p. 27-59) The author introduces the reader to standard interpretations of Plato’s doctrine, why he proposes it, and some of the criticism of it. While the present reviewer takes issue with the author’s claim that Aristotle “rejected” Plato’s theory of forms (28), the author does well to show why, despite its difficulties, Plato’s theory suggests solutions of some difficult philosophical problems: “Plato may have seen it as right [...] to go on believing in Forms, and to look for a solution to the paradoxes that they raise.” (59)

Chapter 4 deals with Plato’s epistemology, focusing on the *Theaetetus* and definition, and the Theory of Recollection in the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Phaedrus*. Chapter 5 introduces Plato’s views on the nature of the soul as a principle of self motion and its immortality, suggesting that “While belief in immortality was a more or less constant feature of his thought, he never found a truly satisfactory argument for it, and it is not surprising that later in life it became for him more of a matter of faith” (109). This chapter takes its material from the *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, and the *Republic*, and ends with a discussion of the divided soul. The author also addresses both Plato’s negative and positive views of the body, which latter is often overlooked in introductions to Plato.

Chapters 6 (p. 119-134), and 7 (p. 135-160), deal with Politics and Ethics, respectively. Aside from a page here and there referencing the *Stateman*, *Laws*, and *Philebus*, the author focuses mainly on the *Republic*, providing an overview of the of the division of the classes of the state, the distinction between Socrates and Plato on the desire for the Good, and the relation of philosophy to practical reason, on which he writes, “In one way, for Plato, philosophy exists for both in our own lives and in the state. But in another way, practice exists for the sake of philosophy; at least one of the aims for practical decisions is to make knowledge and contemplation of Forms possible. There remains a tension at the heart of Plato’s philosophy regarding how we can reconcile these two aims” (160). The author often mentions the “true self”, which he identifies with the rational self. This is a vexed problem in Plato and the Platonic tradition as a whole, and while he mentions the tension between the theoretical and the practical, it would be helpful for the author to expand on this issue, or at least expand on the complexities of antagonism.

Chapter 8 (p. 161-179) is entitled ‘God and nature’. Focusing mainly on the *Timaeus*, the chapter includes a comparison and contrast between the God of Plato and the God of theism, which should provide a useful context for students trying to understand what Plato means by this idea. This chapter also discusses necessity and briefly references the *Laws*. The ninth and final chapter (p. 181-200) deals with Plato’s views on aesthetics. Therein he mentions the typical readings of Plato on poetry, censorship, and imitation. In his discussion on inspiration and beauty he raises the problem that Plato’s own work seems not always to hold up against his own criticisms of what we think of as ‘art’. This is a very good discussion, which should introduce the student to the complexities of this debate, which are often overlooked in critical theory courses on Plato’s criticism of ‘the poets’. There is no real conclusion, and the end material comprises a short four and a half pages of notes, a list of Plato’s works, a ten-page list of suggestions for further reading, a bibliography, and brief index.

The main criticism of the volume the present reviewer would make is this: I wish people will stop calling Plato a dualist. The author writes, for example, “His dualist conception of the mind, according to which it can exist independently of the body, is unpopular in recent thought, and his conception of God is at least alien to mainstream philosophy.” (1) Aside from whether or not this is an enticing way to begin on the first page, and whether Plato’s God is really alien to the ‘mainstream’, I wonder whether if it is even true. Certainly there are kinds of dualisms in Plato that one might draw attention to by opposing body to soul, praxis to theoria, the finite to the infinite, Not-Being to Being,

etc., Plato and the Platonists are much more sophisticated in their consideration of these questions than the term ‘dualism’ (which demands that there are only two things) allows. While using the term ‘dualism’ might be a useful starting point for new students, I unfortunately find that even many tenured professors, who pretend to know more about Plato and the Ancients in general than they actually spend time reading them, never move beyond this vulgar simplification. The term should be abandoned as foreign to Platonic thought before more students become themselves professors who scoff at Plato as unpopular and alien to the mainstream. Indeed, it would be one of Plato’s great virtues that he is “alien to mainstream philosophy”, if the mainstream is unable to think beyond *dualisms*.

In summary, Mason’s *Plato* is an excellent student introduction to the thought of this important figure. While the book does not contain many direct quotations from the primary texts, citations abound, making this a useful supplement to a student’s reading of Plato. The volume is highly readable and accessible to students with no background in Platonic thought, yet it does not gloss over the complexities and tensions in Plato’s writing. While the volume is perhaps not as useful for specialists as Desmond’s *Cynics* in the same series is, nevertheless, the present reviewer will be adding many of the author’s fresh analogies and ways of presenting Plato’s ideas to his own pedagogical arsenal. Like Remes’ *Neoplatonism* in the same series, Mason’s volume presents ideas that can be foreign to students new to philosophy, and Platonic philosophy in particular, in ways that are enticing, penetrating, and often profound.